

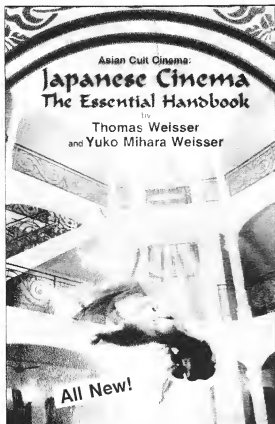


Asian Trash Cinema

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featuring
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CHOW YUN-FAT
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Asian Cult Cinema

Editor: Tom Weisser • Manager: Scott Williams • Design/Art: Francine Dali & Carlos Vargas

Editorial from Tom Weisser

Alright. I changed the name of this magazine from **Asian Trash Cinema** to **Asian Cult Cinema**. Let me explain "why."

When Craig Ledbetter and I became partners back in the early '90s, he was already printing a newsletter called **European Trash Cinema**. As many of you already know, we turned it into a magazine. A year later, when I decided to publish an Oriental *sister* 'zine, it seemed logical to call it **Asian Trash Cinema**. But even at that time I wasn't comfortable with the title.

Initially, Craig had used the word as an endearing term for foreign exploitation films. True, mainstream critics had called these movies "trash" for so long it had become a buzzword for the rest of us. We knew if some high-brow reviewer panned something as *trash*, it was exactly the film we needed to see.

But, unfortunately, **Webster's** conventional definition (*worthless stuff; rubbish*) paints a different picture. And, honestly, even in the world of modern cinema, "trash" does not have a desirable connotation. It is more synonymous with hardcore sex movies than genre exploitation films. Simply, the word does not accurately apply to the type of movies we're talking about in this magazine. **Cult** does.

Craig and I split up ownership of the magazines when we ended our partnership a year ago. Now I feel the time has come for me to take the final step and make things official. But rest assured, regarding this magazine, nothing besides the name has changed. We still have the same staff, the same reviewers, the same editorial policy, and the same dedication to Asian cinema.

I just feel better about its name.

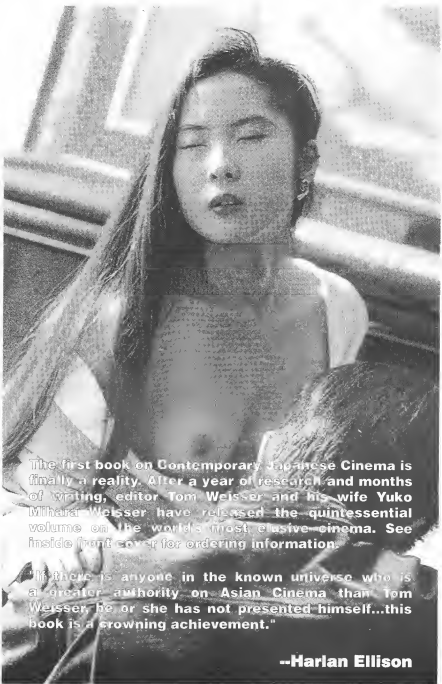
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--Harlan Ellison

Koichiro Uno's Nurses Journal [No Kangofu-ryo Nikki] (1979)

REVIEWS REVIEWS REVIEWS REVIEWS

■ REVIEWS ■

This issue, the bulk of our review section will focus on some of our favorite Chinese directors. In general, we have chosen two films by each and had a member of our review team handle both films. We submit the following for your enjoyment:

WONG JING

GOD OF GAMBLERS

1987

Directed by Wong Jing

Reviewed by John Crawford

Here is one of the most popular examples of Hong Kong cinema in the past decade. *God of Gamblers* is one of the earliest directorial efforts by Wong Jing, currently the most controversial figure in HK moviemaking. Starring Chow Yun-Fat as the gambler who never loses, the film is a showcase of this actors huge talent. The supporting cast is also fantastic. Andy Lau Tak-Wah gives a great performance as the young hustler called Knife, who is always trying to make the big score. Joey Wong Cho-Yin plays the role of Andy's significant other, Jane, and she is as cute as ever. Cheung Man plays the international gambler's girlfriend. This performer is an incredible beauty.

The film begins in San Francisco, moves quickly to Tokyo, and then home to Hong Kong in order to establish the international reputation of Ko Chun, the so-called God of Gamblers. All around nice guy and hero, Ko helps a friend defeat a cheating card player and wins a



huge sum. Meanwhile, Knife and his pals have laid a trap to get revenge against a Singh "puffer", possibly their landlord. Ko, in his efforts to elude the henchmen trying to get the winnings back, stumbles into the trap. In the fall, he strikes his head which causes amnesia.

Ko has no recollection of his background, but soon Knife and Jane discover his super ability with gambling. Chow lets his hair down as the childlike Chocolate, named so by Jane for his love of a certain edible sweet. It is refreshing to see Chow do something different from the cool calculating debonair characters he usually portrays. His performance in this film is riveting.

My favorite scene involves Jane and her dinner date with her parents. Seeking approval from them for her beloved Knife, he is late for some reason and she must substitute the volatile and immature Chocolate. Jane is a nervous wreck and Chocolate tries very hard to impress the doubting, disapproving parents. The poor guy can't pull it off and ends up in fisticuffs with the father. It is one of the funniest scenes I've seen in some time.

Cast in a supporting role, the beautiful Cheung Man appears in *God of Gamblers* as the lover of Ko Chun. In the opening sequences she is shown at Ko's side or in the background as he gambles. They have one scene in the back seat of a limo where they share a piece of chocolate, a laugh, and a cozy kiss. Ko also has a guy Friday, you know, a right-hand man, confidant, chauffeur, etc. Later, after Ko's injury and disappearance, the assistant comes on to Cheung, insisting he would be a better man for her. She, of course, resists his advances and attempted rape. In the struggle, she is thrown out of a second floor window and killed. In his rage the berserk assistant runs outside and has his way with the dead woman.

While many articles about *God of Gamblers* have appeared in film journals since it first premiered, not one of them, to my knowledge, ever mentioned necrophilia. How about that?! Wong Jing has been criticized for his treatment of women in his films and I'm sure this scene has helped to foster that opinion.

CITY HUNTER

1992

Directed by Wong Jing

Reviewed by John Crawford

In theory, this sounds like a project made in HK filmmaking heaven. The

Jackie Chan



ducer-Director to make a film based on a very popular comic book. In reality the movie is a frenetic jumble of crazy stunts, gunplay, beautiful women, and some wonderful kung fu fighting by the irrepressible Jackie Chan.

City Hunter is a wild roller coaster of a movie. It begins with kind of a prologue done in 60's Batman TV show style. Chan plays Ryu Saeba, a playboy/private eye who is hired to find the teenage runaway daughter of a Japanese millionaire. Chan had a partner who, when dying, had him promise to care for dying man's little sister, never to romance her. Well, the little sister becomes Ryu's assistant and grows up into Joey Wong Cho-Yin. Hubba-Hubba! Of course, Jackie can't act on his desire for his sexy assistant and she, in turn, wishes he would love her, not knowing of her brother's last wish.

One of the first sequences in which Jackie gets to show off his unique skills involves a complicated chase scene, on skateboards, in moving traffic. Chan and his stunt men leap and fly over moving autos.

Much has been written about how Chan controls his films and it is even more evident here as all the so-called "Jackie" touches are present. What is also evident is the stamp of the action director, Ching Siu-Tung, a great director in his own right. The collaboration of Chan and Ching has turned *City Hunter* into a remarkable film.

Through various plot devices all the characters wind up on board a cruise ship that is being attacked by a gang of international terrorists for some reason (loot would be a good guess!). The runaway Kiyoko, played by Kumiko Goto, finds a ticket in the pocket of a costume she uses to elude Jackie. His assistant Kaori, disgusted with her boss's flirtations goes on holiday with her cousin. While trying to board the ship, Jackie runs into secret agent Chingmy Yau Suk-Ching. Hubba-Hubba! Her character Saeko thinks Ryu Saeba is a pest but she secretly loves him.

Jackie stows away to get on board and the fun begins as he searches the ship for his buddies and some food. It is his birthday and he hasn't had a thing to eat all day! He catches up with Kiyoko as the terrorists are taking over the ship. Jackie fights off the bad guys with some beautiful scenes that show his hand-to-hand and pole fighting skills. In one scene he gets help from Bruce Lee (!) in an empty shipboard screening room. In another scene, Jackie and two of his little buddies turn into the *Streetfighter* video game characters. Dressed in drag, Jackie defeats the enemy, an Anglo-creep who tried to rape Joey.

City Hunter is a light hearted comedy adventure that Jackie Chan fans will thoroughly enjoy. Wong Jing's reputation as the most prolific filmmaker working in Hong Kong is strengthened by his collaborative work with all the artists involved.

WONG CHI CHANG

♦ ♦ ♦

CRIME STORY

1992

Directed by WCC aka Kirk Wong

Reviewed by John Dodd

The lack of the patented Jackie Chan end credit outtakes and bloopers says more about this film than anything. During the early 90's Jackie Chan was trying to take more challenging projects. There was a John Woo-style actioner (*Police Story 3*), a comedy tribute to Japanese animation (*City Hunter*), and this film - an almost completely humorless police thriller.

A nervous Inspector Eddie Chan (Jackie Chan) is introduced during a psychiatric evaluation. The psychiatrist explains that an officer who fires his weapon faces three dangers: hitting an innocent person, getting wounded by the attackers, and finally killing the attacker but not being able to deal with it psychologically. The inspector is this third type. Throughout this scene Chan's acting hits just the right tone. This is an unusual role for Jackie Chan. Inspector Chan is a serious, soft-spoken, professional, and sensitive. Chan the actor over-expresses only a couple times. But for most of the film, Chan plays it perfectly.

The plot has Wang, a wealthy and (a tad) unscrupulous businessman believing he is about to be kidnapped. The police assign Inspector Chan to the case. Wang is eventually kidnapped and Inspector Chan works to track the kidnappers down. It's interesting to note that the Inspector is hardly alone. He works in a large team that cooperate to track the kidnappers. Into this team is called a Detective Hung (Kent Cheung) who broke

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action and exploitation

Director Wong Chi Chang



Wang's first kidnapping some time before. Hung is in fact one of the kidnappers and works to subvert the case.

Crime Story is an interesting blend of Hong Kong-style action in a police procedural plot. The mix works well. The interaction between the police in the station is professional and feels honest. There are other examples of procedure in the film's running time, the remittance exchange sequence is the stand-out. The money exchange scene in these type of films have become something of a cliché. This one is intense, riveting, and feels like it could unfold like this in real life. The screenwriter (whose name I unfortunately do not know) infuses the film with intelligence and a sense of practicality. Director Kirk Wong highlights this realism by giving a pseudo-documentary style to the film with dates and places underneath the action. The film claims that the story is real. It might be although films based on reality usually have little in common with the real incident (to which Hollywood

can attest). Regardless of truth, one feels, for the most part, that it could have happened this way.

Crime Story would still be a suspenseful film even if there was no action shown (anyone who has ever seen Akira Kurosawa's masterful *High And Low* can vouch for this). But since *Crime Story* is a Hong Kong film, there is plenty of action along the way. The flashback of the shootout with terrorists is one of the absolute best shootouts in a Jackie Chan film. Partially because of Inspector Chan's weariness and partially because the scene is amazingly choreographed. The take-down of the kidnapper's hideout in Taiwan has the intense style of action one expects from a Hong Kong actioner. Lastly, Jackie Chan proves that he can work his skill and trademarks into a deadly serious film. The boat scene is an incredible display of battery. Also, there are two well-done martial arts scenes: The climax, of course, and a particularly wild scene where Chan and a suspect tangle in the police station. Both scenes are typical of Jackie Chan's martial arts, simply some of the very best ever.

The fluid incorporation of both documentary-like techniques and Hong Kong-style action is a definite tribute to director Wong's skill. Of course, both Jackie and the screenwriter contributed much. I've praised both earlier but the screenwriter is also responsible for the few slight faults this film has.

The beginning establishes Inspector Chan as tense, on edge. He is having trouble coping with killing the terrorists. However, this rather interesting angle is never explored. In fact it is contradicted by the ending in which the Inspector becomes a tough, Dirty Harry-style cop. At one point he shoots a burning suspect without any hint of regret. This contradiction is a problem. Another one is the climax which breaks from the matter of fact style with the Inspector having to rescue a young boy in a fire, a touch melodra-

matic. Both points are distracting but small in regard to how much *Crime Story* works as a whole. Jackie Chan took a gamble with this film and it paid off for both him as an actor and for us as the audience.

LOVE TO KILL

1993

Directed by Kirk Wong

Reviewed by John Dodd

Love To Kill is a typical 1990's Hong Kong film: sex, nudity, violence, and a dizzying sense of genre-hopping. Yet, despite all of this, *Love To Kill* remains a lifeless excursion.

Sam Wong (a badly overacting Anthony Wong) is not a nice man. He is a professional and seems to have a fair amount of money. But his interaction with others is cold and when it comes to his wife Jade (Elizabeth Lee), his manner is brutal.

Toward the beginning of the film the audience is presented with a vicious rape scene as Sam slams around Jade, violates her with a beer bottle, and finally puts a plastic bag over her head. Jade punches Sam and runs into the street with her husband in pursuit. A hot shot cop called Fire Ball Hung comes upon the man beating his wife. Hung breaks up the fight, hauling the couple to the police station. But Jade won't press charges and Sam is set free.

The first third of this film is a female melodrama. Jade has known little of life except through Sam and is as scared of life without him as with him. Jade's mother has stomach cancer and, thanks to Sam, an opium addiction. Jade can't stand her mother's pain and tries to smother her with a pillow. At the jailhouse Jade tries to commit suicide. She is a confused woman with a young son, a violent

marriage, and a mother in pain. This is typical melodrama complete with broken mirrors and lots of silent self-reflection. Elizabeth Lee handles these quieter scenes well but overdoes it on the heavier tears scenes.

Female melodrama not your thing? Well, then the film switches to a buddy/romantic/situation comedy as Hung takes in Jade and her son. Jenny, a stripper and Hung's girlfriend, is at first angry but grows to like Jade and the young boy. Meanwhile, Hung becomes attracted to Jade and can't think about anything but her. Hung hallucinates Jade while Jenny is performing a strip tease for him. In order to solve the problem of too many women, Hung enlists the help of his immediate superior and good friend Robert. All of this is played for laughs and quite different from the heavy melodrama before it.

Not a fan of melodrama or situation comedy? Then maybe the psycho-drama which climaxes in a Run And Kill-style finale will be of more interest. Old Sam is crazier than Jade thinks. As a boy he watched his father kill his mother (and almost him) before killing himself. It seems Sam's mother had been unfaithful. Now Sam wants to bring his family home for a most unusual reunion. The finale borrows from every other slasher film as an axe, a nail gun, and a board with nails in it all get used with much relish. This finale is violent and bloody but since the rest of the film is uninteresting one can't care much about it.

The major problem with *Love To Kill* is that it doesn't bring anything new to the feast. We've all seen this type of melodrama/ comedy/ psychothriller before (although admittedly, not all in the same film). Even though it isn't badly paced, the familiarity makes the film seem much slower than it is.

Another problem is the constant jerking-around the filmmakers do to the audience. With so many different tones and

Anthony Wong



styles the film never builds to an emotionally satisfying climax. Not much is answered by the ending except that a threat is eliminated. All the subplots (Jenny, Hung's suspension, the relationship between Hung and Robert, Jade's future) are ignored. The throwaway ending about the nature of self-defense is illogical in the context of the situation.

Kirk Wong is an interesting director. The film noir visual style and low-key understated narrative of *Crime Story* made that film unique. That visual style is present here. The opening rape scene where jade runs out into the street on a rainy night is an excellent scene that calls to mind the opening of Wong's *True Colors*. It's the best scene in the entire movie, intense in staging and lighting. Another wonderful shot is Jade chained to the wall as sunlight enters from above, giving the room and over-lit effect. But director Wong has abandoned the matter-of-fact storytelling for a sensationalistic

shock piece. And shock it does. The rape scenes are harrowing (an argument could be made that they are overly so), the violence explicit, and the nudity/cheesecake element used frequently. In fact, the most unusual thing about this film is the presence of genital female nudity in an insert shot. But after a while, one begins to miss the documentary-procedural style that Wong displayed in *Crime Story*.

Love To Kill is a hollow film. A film that has moments that work in each genre that it attempts. Jade's self-reflections in the melodrama section are done well. The relationship that develops between the world-weary stripper and the naive housewife had the potential to be quite funny. Lastly, the violent climax does deliver on...well, the violence. But since there is neither mood nor story, the audience never cares. By the time the credits roll the viewer is just glad to be done with the whole mess.

TSUI HARK



ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA

1991

Directed by Tsui Hark
Reviewed by Mike Plante

Recently, when *El Cid* was re-released, Charlton Heston stated: "They don't make movies like this anymore", meaning epics. No, Chuck, they don't in America anymore. But they do in Hong Kong.

Ironically, one of my favorite films and one of the last great epics is *Once Upon A Time In The West* by Sergio Leone. To define epic: sprawling sets, authentic period costumes, powerful heroes and

powerful villains, over 2 hours of film, a thousand extras, and a damn big story. I don't know if Tsui Hark was influenced by this film (besides the name), but he sure pegged an authentic epic.

Once...China is the first of Tsui Hark's series (now at 5) about the turn-of-the-century character Wong Fei-Hung. A real person who taught martial arts in addition to being a healer, Fei-Hung has been the subject in scores of films. Much like our own gunfighters, myth has intertwined with fact to create a superhero. And this film best shows the unique HK blend of deep plots with fantastic flying martial arts. This is not your superficial fighting film.

Once has an incredible cast. Jet Li was propelled to stardom in his portrayal of Fei-Hung, always caring and trying to stop fighting, then kicking you in the back of the head while looking in your eyes when you don't get the point. The beautiful Rosamund Kwan is Aunt Yee, who is more westernized with her clothes, English, and new fangled camera. Fei-

Hung's crew is rounded out by Jacky Cheung and Kent Cheng (as usual, playing a character called Fatty or Porky). Always underrated Yuen Biao is the drifter who falls in with villain Wu Ma (swordsman Yen from Chinese Ghost Story).

To write a synopsis, I'd have to show you the script. Sometimes confusing, the plot consists of varied infighting of different groupings, including the Chinese, Chinese government, local gangs, the British, and the Americans. Fei-Hung's clan tries to keep peace but fights when their backs are against the wall. Aunt Yee takes pictures of it all. The first time I saw this it was without subtitles, and I kept up with the general ideas just fine. In fact, I was glued to every frame, with or without story. Tsui is so cinematic that a complicated plot is still comprehensible without words. Even for 130 minutes!

Did I say fighting? You bet your fist of legend! The action is incredible - Jet doesn't just embarrass you, he does it with whatever's in reaching distance: umbrellas, hot water, fans, tables. One of the best film fights ever takes place between Jet and Wu Ma with flying ladders. And this isn't even the ending!

What makes the action great is that you actually can tell who's who and care about who wins. Tsui's strength with this series is to give you the characterization to root for good vs. evil and to keep you entertained when teeth aren't being swept up. The story is moved by the fighting, not stopped.

Tsui masters the qualities of an epic film. He could be the best director of settings and extras since Leone. An authenticity is achieved when the city is crammed with people, markets, signs, houses. Tsui uses his widescreen photography perfectly: to paint a portrait of a past time and transport you there for a fun ride. He's not afraid to use close-ups, either. You see the tension in the fighter's faces. Not just muscle, they're thinking.



Jet Li

You see Aunt Yee's love for Fei-Hung as she traces his silhouette from an oil lamp. Words aren't spoken. It's not necessary.

If you haven't guessed by now, this is one of the ten best HK films, along with the second in the series. Drama as good as any love story, action as good as any fantasy. Much like America's westerns, it doesn't really matter if it's all true. We love the myth with the man. And as Aunt Yee goes around taking pictures with her magic camera, Tsui Hark shows us with his magic camera that cinema wasn't just invented and given to Americans, it was given to everyone.

Zu: Warriors From Magic Mountain

1983

**Directed by Tsui Hark
Reviewed by Mike Plante**

I recently got my old Atari game system back out and started playing *Combat*, *Pitfall*, and *River Raid* again. All these years of perfect 3-D video games have ruined my imagination. Don't get me wrong, I love virtual reality nonsense. But Atari graphics have their own personality, even if it's dated. This is what it's like watching *Zu*.

In the early 1980's, director Tsui Hark went to Hollywood and brought back special effects teams to mix with Hong Kong's classical mythology - *Zu* is the result.

10th century China is in the midst of an old war between numerous factions. Luckily, they all wear different colors. As Ti (Yuen Biao) is escaping from bad colors, he discovers a cave which leads to the underworld of the magic mountain. He helps magical good fight ancient evil as the blood monster wants to conquer all.

The fighting below parallels the senseless wars of man above.

Dated, yet enjoyable light entertainment, *Zu* shows the starting block for Tsui's later, more refined, efforts. All the style is there: flying people, flying swords, flying camerawork, big sets, extravagant period costumes, inventive lighting, and maybe most importantly, Tsui's quick editing. Apparently, the flying wire wasn't perfected yet, so most of the FX revolves around stop-motion animation. Since most people can't really fly, and others really don't know how to cut you up with a sword, the editing makes it all work. Quick cuts keep the action fast and furious. If you can get past the goofiness of Long Bow corralling ancient evil with his eyebrows, you'll do fine. It's actually an authentic Chinese legend.

The first of the HK wave of super-FX fantasies, *Zu* still does better than many of its imitators. Tsui doesn't take the subject matter so seriously, yet has a message about the centuries of pointless warfare. Very few can match the wild color and action of *Zu* as well. While not as political as other Tsui Hark films, it does confirm that he has always had the style and technical ability to make it in America. By the way, at the climactic fight, you can see Samo Hung take on Tsui Hark in the big fight (it's a draw).



director Tsui Hark

LAU CHANG WEI

◆ ◆ ◆

MR. VAMPIRE

1984

Directed by Lau Chang-Wei

Reviewed by Frank Kilzer

Routine and tedious. That's how I found most of the horror/comedy movies out of Honk Kong. It was the blazing guns, flashing swords, and acrobatic fighting that struck my interest years ago. Otherwise I'd be stuck watching the even more copycat domestic crap. That is until I viewed *Mr. Vampire* and realized that this is the real benchmark of the unique genre. Ricky Lau (Lau Chang-Wei) made this way back in 1984 and even being over a decade old it still seems fresh. Kung fu vet Lam Chang Ying has the now classic role of Kau, the "One Eyebrow Priest." Not only has this character spawned sequels galore but he sets the standard for monks that paint spells on yellow strips of paper. Of the many "ghost" movies I have viewed, only the innovative *Crazy Safari* matches up well with *Mr. Vampire*. The former stars Lam Chan Ying as well and owes a great debt to the earlier film.

The evil creature that Kau is up against is a super-vampire. Violent and persistent, this type will show up in other Lau films. This is a comedy though and the screenplay gives ample time to the priest's two apprentices, Man and Chou. Both are pranksters and the plot splits up with the women they meet. Chou gets romanced by a somewhat ditsy ghost that is sapping his life. As for Man, he's doing his best trying to protect his girlfriend, Ting-Ting, from the vampire. We also learn about these weird hopping monsters. One of the running gags is their

attraction to bells and human breathing. Hold your breath and they can't "see" you. Problem is, try doing this while being scared shitless by a blood-drinking goon.

Man does get injured and is slowly turning into a vampire. This forces Kau to do dental work with a file on Man's growing fangs. As for Chou's flying ghost (played by Moon Lee), the priest's powers defeat the spirit but Kau lets her off the hook. Until the sequel.

Of course, *Mr. Vampire* has the fast tempo fight scenes one expects to see. And since I don't have room to explain all the scenes, try this: Imagine *Night Of The Living Dead* as directed by Tex Avery. That's the "anything goes" concept that Ricky Lau shows here. He has a great visual sense to his humor. Also, Lau likes to use the full circle approach to ending some of his scripts. Easily discarded events that occur early in the story, tend to turn up at it's climax. This gives the movie a feeling of completeness. At least in the sense that the *Mr. Vampire* series just keeps on goin'.

SPOOKY FAMILY

1989

Directed by Lau Chang Wei

Reviewed by Frank Kilzer

An *Addams Family* start is not the only thing borrowed by Ricky Lau's *Spooky Family*. The theme music is played often...but what the *Mr. Vampire* director borrows the most is from his own rich movie background. In this film he uses the sight gag in abundance. Some of the humor is of the set-up variety. However, during the extended fight scenes the jokes keep on shooting. This time mortals make up the family unit and not the ghosts.

The ever-rotund Kent Cheng plays Fatty, who's job is like a ghostbuster, who lives with his wife, daughter, and an eager but slightly dim son. The other household member is called Ghost Servant which is exactly what he is -- a very silly character but very loyal to the family. While the women are involved in telling fortunes, Fatty has the ability to capture and store all sorts of ghosts and vampires (hopping kind). With his son, he has the spirits kept in spell-topped jars and is now experimenting on the vampires to electronically control them. Soon father and son are off to capture what is referred to as a Copper Vampire. Being much more powerful than other types, the Copper is subdued but not as easily. Chop-socky overtones are in this fight sequence, with rapid fire stunts that are very funny. Kind of foul too. After returning home with the demon, Fatty has to deal with the spirit of an old flame. Her image appears wherever there is water, making dinner time hell for Fatty.

Yet another colleague, Top Wizard, gets into a duel of magic with Fatty. The back and forth test of skill results in Top Wizard taking off the spells on the Copper. Another battle of equal intensity lets loose a bunch of zombies that attack the family. Fatty's group now has his girlfriend's spirit helping out. Zombies destroyed, they still must deal with the Copper's Rasputin-like force. Saving the day is Ghost Servant who takes over another vampire's body. The two creatures fight until both end up in Fatty's mind control machine. There is an explosion but overall the movie ends sweet...especially for Fatty.

Ricky Lau films can be of an inconsistent quality. His sequels (one for this movie in 1991) stretches too far sometimes. And he also did a tough thing: make an awful movie with Chow Yun-Fat (*Treasure Hunt*). However, *Spooky Family* is a solid peak of a long career. Very entertaining for its class when other films keep you on the fast-forward button.

CHANG CHEH

♦ ♦ ♦

FIVE DEADLY VENOMS

1978

Directed by Chang Cheh

Reviewed by Brick Reno

The clever gimmicks that sets *Five Deadly Venoms* apart from routine HK martial arts flicks takes a page from detective stories by slowly revealing clues that sustain the viewers interest. Don't look for a chop socky Chinatown, but there are enough double crosses, mystery, and intrigue to make this film highly recommended viewing. This copy has decent dubbing, English credits, and is letterboxed. A few reservations must be noted. First, I offer that the fight scenes fluctuate between routine and staid. It's



director Chang Cheh

like the director, Chang Cheh, couldn't juggle the flips and flops of the plot with creative bone crunching. Also, while I admire tapes letterboxed preserving original aspect ratios, the compositions are all front and center, and never stray from the TV safe area. All the dead space on both corners of the frame provide good argument for Fritz Lang's old adage that wide screen is only good for funerals and snakes. Another fast one pulled: While the camera remains stationary in nearly every shot, the use swish zooms attempts to compensate for lackluster choreography. Minor quibbles.

The movie starts off like many do, master explains dilemma to eager beaver student. They are part of an ancient clan, practitioners of the "poison claw" martial arts and a renegade band has left the school. The teacher suspects that each is in search of a former teacher, loaded with money. The awol warriors wore masks during instruction and took new names when they left. The only way to recognize them is by the fighting style that each of them favor. These characters are alternately referred to by numbers and names which may add to confusion during initial viewings. The teacher explains their idiosyncrasies in careful voiceover while visually we are introduced to #1, the centipede, #2, the snake, #3, scorpion, #4, the lizard, and #5, the toad, who incidentally, is nearly invincible. This introduction to the student's adversaries is inspired, words and images complement and the setup is succinct.

The student was taught the main techniques of the Poison Clan and cannot defeat the others without making an ally of one. He heads off to parts unknown to find names unknown. The student, whose name we learn is #4 in the last reel, doesn't seem like an actor in the film, but more like a tour guide. He eavesdrops on conversations and takes notes early on and vanishes for most of the film. Third person narrative employed, the story didn't

seem to have a hero to latch on to. I found myself rooting for #5, the toad; he was setup for a crime he didn't commit by a police force whose sense of justice is whatever they say, goes. Appearances being very important, the police go to great lengths to secure their power over the town by covering up their elimination of any perceived threat. #5 is accused of murdering the rich teacher and an eyewitness is paid off by #1 and #2, (the killers and cops!). #1 and #2 take out five or six and snuff the teacher.

Boy, does the plot thicken. Five Deadly Venoms story machinations become Shakespearian in proportion and it is quite a task of keeping pace. Because this flick is so information driven, emphasis of distinction between characters must come from costumes and actors' physicality. Repeated viewings reveal subtleties of character. First viewing is like taking minutes at a meeting of The Usual Suspects.

You'll find that the martial arts sequences intensify in tandem with the ambitious scope of the story culminating in a battle royale where allegiances somersault as much the fighters.

NINE DEMONS

1983

Directed by Chang Cheh

Reviewed by Brick Reno

Nine Demons is a must have film, mail in rebates, collect cans, donate plasma, whatever it takes to scrounge up the cash to add it to your collection.

It's quite a concoction of brilliant action sequences woven together with a scanty plot. Forget any pretensions of psychological realism and serious human relationships, forgive the trifle of a storyline and enjoy this kaleidoscopic acid trip.

The integration of color, choreography, decor, costumes, camera movement and editing in *Nine Demons* is everything I find exciting about movies. This thing is formally pure and an excellent demonstration of skilled filmmaking.

Like everywhere else in the world, movies in Hong Kong are big business and realistically, the only reason this movie was made is so someone could stuff their pockets with a little doe rei me. A safe formula for success is blood and guts, and *Nine Demons* knows the routine.

Set in ancient times when men were men but looked like women, the movie opens with an unexplained severe beating over the titles (so far so good), a young man races from the scene as spouts of steam surround him. A disorienting cut to darkness, the young man, our hero Joey, falls, in every angle imaginable, to a dark and cavernous place. He lands and is promptly greeted by spooky, electronic music and a voice that says, "Halt, you've entered the black palace." A slow, Antonioni pan away from Joey starts as the voice over continues. "Every 500 years the gate opens, you chanced into it, you're lucky to see. Kneel down on your knees." You'll notice two things right away. One, Joey's not in Kansas anymore, and two, the halting inflections of the dubbing will be good for a laugh. A very beautiful man in metallic eyeliner and a garish headdress explains, "I'm the Black Prince of Hell, state your wishes I may grant them." Joey replies, "Yin staged a rebellion and killed my father, then he took over Johnson's estate. And now I want to know Gary's whereabouts, he's my friend." Using black magic, The Queen, I mean, Prince of Hell shows Gary about to beheaded by cronies of Yin. Joey pleads for the prince to save Gary, who'd like to, but is trapped in the black cavern for some vague reason. He suggests that Joey do it himself, but Joey doubts himself. Setup. "You

have the power, I'll give it to you." Joey blurts out, "I'll do anything to save Gary and seek revenge". Hooked.

Without a second thought, Joey proclaims his loyalty and is given the magic of the titular nine demons. The nine demons consist of eight bloodthirsty, acrobatic cub scouts and one man-eating Den mother. When they're not bouncing around, cackling hysterically, and gnawing your flesh, they travel in compact form.

Each demon is represented by a skull that can float around independently, (remember those Three Stooges haunted house shorts?), or they link together to form a spinning necklace of death. To make the nine demons Joey's servants, they must enter his body and take his blood. Joey learns that there is no backing out of his bargain, or he will self destruct. Unconcerned, he begins a slow motion, Twyla Tharp routine; with blood spurting from chest wounds as the skull necklace feasts. Now that the premise is laid, Joey is off, a new cape on his back and vengeance in his heart.

Not sold yet? See "Demon" Joey and pal Gary dispose of evil captors with the affable detachment of Crosby and Hope in a Road movie. Meet Mia; the new hooker in town who ain't damaged goods. Hiss at the evil Foo brothers, focus of Gary's revenge. They devise a brilliant plan of strapping canoe-like clogs on their feet and fighting Joey on water in one of the many imaginative set pieces. Slip sliding away, they don't count on his black magic-hovercraft gymnastics. Behold Buddha; with words of wisdom that we could all learn from.

There are many large chunks of the plot of *Nine Demons* are pure hokum as HK-philes have come to expect, but the bloodletting and supernatural excesses are a beautiful barrage of cinematic trickery. Get this film, a six pack, and commence to wear out the heads on your VCR.

CHU YEN-PING

◆ ◆ ◆

GOLDEN QUEEN COMMANDO

1984

Directed by Chu Yen-Ping
Reviewed by Daniel Grissom

This oddity from Chu Yen-Ping may just about blow your mind. Although it starts off as a seen-it-all-before band of female assassins who meet, and team up, in prison story, parts of it actually take on a spaghetti western persona (Morricone music and all).

As I just said, the movie begins by introducing us to the seven female bad-asses that eventually wind up in prison. Make no bones about it, these women are bad. Most are wanted for murder, can kick major butt, and are really quite sexy. But Chu Yen-Ping does more than just collect the right ingredients, he keeps the story interesting with clever plot twists.

In prison, the women fall under the leadership of Black Fox, who plans their escape only to recruit the others for a government mission. Along the way the GQC's meet up with a clownish warlord who joins them when his village is destroyed. He provides the comic relief (not very much of it). All the while, they are pursued by a calvary of black-caped soldiers.

The women have to use all their resources to keep from being captured including having to weed out a spy amongst them. Their mission is to destroy a rebel chemical plant in the Valley of Death. Of course the plant is heavily fortified with about a zillion soldiers but to the GQC's this just means more men they have to kill.

new real-life mommy
Lin Ching-Hsai (Brigitte Lin)



One by one, the GQC's die off. However, they do manage to destroy the chemicals and blow up the rebel leader. One GQC dies when a metal door crushes her and another blows herself up. Through all this carnage the only survivors are the clownish warlord and the Black Fox. Which of course begs the question: Did Black Fox just use the others knowing they would not return and she would? Who knows? Who really cares? (I gave away the ending out of respect for your intelligence. Anyone who couldn't guess that ending shouldn't be watching *anything*.)

The copy I watched was dubbed and the pictured seemed to be severely cropped. But more important than these small gripes, Chu Yen-Ping proves he can make a unique and exciting action/adventure. Unique because of his usage of a wide array of characters and his settings. The film never lets you figure out the period it is set in. This may sound like a defect but I thought it added to the

fantasy/adventure element of the film. GQC stays exciting by never stopping to catch its breath. One challenge fades into another challenge. I also like the fact that the director doesn't wimp out in end - - almost everyone dies. (As well they should considering what they were up against.) Chu Yen-Ping seems to like the "team-work" theme and this film probably set the stage for a more ambitious "team-work" film like *Island Of Fire*.

ISLAND OF FIRE

1991

Directed by Chu Yen-Ping

Reviewed by Daniel Grissom

With *Island Of Fire*, Chu Yen-Ping delivers a more typical, modern HK action film. Its all here: corrupt beaurocrats, gangsters, undercover police assignments, prison life, revenge, double-crosses, ultra-violence, and a excellent cast (including Jackie Chan). Like *Golden Queen Commando*, the director brings together several characters, who all meet in prison, for a suicide mission - - assassinate an Asian drug lord. Following the lives and points of view of many characters is very ambitious and at times Chu Yen-Ping almost loses his step but he somehow manages to bring it all together for the film's finale...or maybe it's just that when we reach the finale, the past has become inconsequential.

The main plot concerns a prison warden who fakes the execution of prisoners so he may recruit them into the Ching Fung Team - - assassins sent out to knock off criminals who have "beaten" the system. The subplots include: how each character ends up in prison, conflicts between rival prisoners, and the conflict between the prisoners and the prison officials. This last conflict is demonstrated by

a couple of hilarious scenes of prisoner solidarity and defiance. In the chilling "rice eating scene" the prisoners boldly stand up to finish off a large bowl of rice forced upon Kui, the prison patriarch. Another scene shows the prisoners really getting even with the guards by completing their work detail two hours early (strike another one up for prisoners' rights).

Don't let the intriguing main plot fool you. It actually gets lost throughout most of the film and when it finally resurfaces near the end you realize you had forgotten it even existed. I'd also like to take a moment to bitch about these damn Chinese subtitles...it's an old complaint but I will say it again. I believe these subs are the worse I've seen to date. Here are some examples: "Are you dislike me too," "Eat this will rich, eat taht will itch," and "Don't try to against me, understand." No, I don't understand. Am I on drugs? (Well, maybe, but that's not the issue.) I will happily accept a proofreading job in



Jackie Chan returns to the set after a bathroom break

China if anyone is interested in hiring me. Anyone could do a better job than this!

Despite these minor criticisms, I must recommend this film to any admirer of HK action/drama. The film has a lot going for it. Great performances and a complex interplay between a diverse group of characters gives *Island Of Fire* that extra something. It won't change your life but it is certainly not a waste of time.

RONNIE YU

◆ ◆ ◆

THE BRIDE WITH
WHITE HAIR

1993

Directed by Ronnie Yu
Reviewed by John Crawford

Much has been written about this movie. It has had a ton of exposure at art houses and HK film festivals throughout the world. Ronnie Yu has been championed by critics in various media outlets including the pages of this humble publication.

The *Bride with White Hair* is a visually feast. Filmed in Super-Panavision, the movie is full of amazing sets and costumes. Brigitte Lin Ching-Hsia turns in a wonderful performance as the Wolf Girl with super martial arts powers. Leslie Cheung Kwok-Wing plays her lover Cho, the young leader of Wu Tang and a master sword fighter. Raised by wolves, Lin's character is adopted by the underground Mo Cult, led by Siamese male/female twins joined at the back! She is trained as the #1 killer who uses a whip to sever her enemies limbs, heads, and torsos. The action scenes are incredibly choreo-

Lin Ching-Hsia



graphed with the editing and framing adding to the beautiful sense of movement throughout the movie.

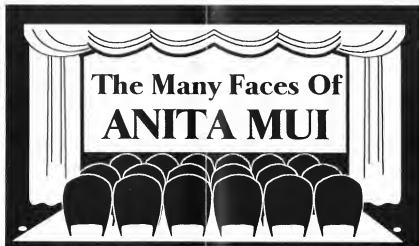
The screenplay of the film is centered on the character of Cho Yi-hang and search for the mysterious girl who saved him from an attack of wolves. Years later, Cho is the chosen leader of Wu Tang, amid much controversy. The two star-crossed lovers meet again during a childbirth, and Cho follows Lien, the wolf girl, to her secret place at the Riverlake. He watches Lien as she bathes in the waterfalls. She discovers him hiding but must run off to her master before they learn about each other. Later, after being ordered to kill the leaders of Wu Tang (Cho included), the two begin a torrid love affair at the Riverlake hideaway.

In the end, all hell breaks loose. The evil twins banish Lien from the Cult and frame her for the murders of Wu Tang. She seeks out Cho who questions her innocence and she goes ballistic.



A COLLECTION
FROM THE PHOTOBOOK OF
ANITA MUI

Designed by Carlos Vargas



Hong Kong singer
turned actress
Star of 30+ movies
Often linked romantically
with Jackie Chan



REVIEWS Continued

CHING SIU TUNG

♦ ♦ ♦

CHINESE GHOST STORY

1987

Directed by Ching Siu Tung

Reviewed by John Dodd

The dark knight dressed in armor and concealed by an eerie fog charges over the existential wasteland of nothingness. He is pure evil. The Knight's steed is unstoppable, a horse from the very gates of Hell. A lone priest armed with a single arrow is all the chance good has. The priest positions the bow at the charging knight, pulls it back, and then as he is about to fire, the dark knight disappears. The priest falters a moment and then turns around and the knight is behind him, charging him still. The priest pulls the bow back and the knight disappears again into the fog.

Some movies live past the boundaries of their running time. Of course all films become a part of the consciousness of those who watch them. But some, a few, become something more to both individuals and society. Think for a moment of the classic scenes from great movies. These are the scenes that everyone remembers. The ones that critics and public alike have become transfixed with; the festive ending of *8 1/2*; *White Heat's* "top of the world, ma;" the communication through music scene of *Close Encounters Of The Third Kind*; *Blow Up's* mime tennis; from the opening tracking shot of *Touch Of Evil* to the last reel of the *Wild Bunch*; from



The Searchers' doorway to Gene Kelly (and Malcolm McDowell) Singin' In The Rain; from Ingrid Bergman and Humphrey Bogart's farewell in *Casablanca* to *Suspiria's* opening double murder. All of these and far too many more to name have entered the cultural consciousness.

Hong Kong cinema has produced moments every bit as good as some of these classic scenes. The description of the dark knight's attack is from the "storming Hell" sequence in *Chinese Ghost Story*. It remains one of the greatest climaxes in movie history, full of action, emotion, special effects and a tone that calls to mind the greatest fairy tales of our childhood. This film is a passionate, heart-felt love story, a spooky horror tale, and a rousing edge-of-the-seat adventure. People talk of the sense of wonderment in the films of Steven Spielberg. But for all of his fame and notoriety, Spielberg has never made a film as good as *Chinese Ghost Story*. A

Joey Wang

film that is smart (political satire), erotic, creepy, exciting, and a sheer joy whether one is nine or 90.

Most people reading this magazine has probably seen the film. But a plot summary may be in order for the few that haven't yet had the privilege of the rest of us...I count myself *very* fortunate to have been able to see it for the first time in a theatre on the big screen.

Ning Tsai-Shen (Leslie Cheung) is a young, simple, tax collector. His job takes him into a town where the habitants are very superstitious of the forest and Lan Ro Temple which is supposed to be haunted. Ning sets off for the temple because he has no money to stay at the inn. Arriving after dark, Ning finds an intense monk, Yen (Wu Ma), who scares Ning. One night Ning meets a beautiful woman, Tsing (Joey Wang). He is nervous and acts insecure around her. She is a ghost and is forced to sacrifice men to a 1000 year old tree monster. But Tsing falls for the sensitive Ning and spares him. Ning returns night after night (not knowing she is a ghost) and Tsing keeps warning him to stay away. Meanwhile Yen is in a spiritual battle with the tree demon and her ghost minions.

What is amazing is how everything in this film works. There is humor, romance, action, satire, horror, martial arts, even a sort of musical interlude, and yet all of these elements only add to the overall beauty of the film. I began by describing a scene from an incredible sequence; what is astounding is that there are other scenes equal to that one: Ning menaced in the basement; the howling "wolves;" the lovers' first kiss and, of course, their farewell. These scenes haven't been described in detail so as not to spoil the first viewing of the film. But for the rest of us, these sparse descriptions conjure up vivid memories. All of these scenes are as good as the ones listed previously from the established classics.

Ching Siu Tung's visual quality is amaz-

ing. One only needs to look at the "storming Hell" sequence to see how a great deal can be accomplished while showing very little. The wiretrick action has a fluidity that only the best Tsui Hark films can match. Hark was, of course, the producer on *Chinese Ghost Story*. Having seen the first two *Swordsman* films and *Witch From Nepal*, the Ching Siu Tung influence with the visuals and fight choreography is strongly noticeable. But the unrepentant fairy tale style romantic gusto definitely suggests Hark. One needs only to compare the fog kiss from *Once Upon A Time In China 3* or the storyline of *Green Snake* for evidence. Of course, no one can say for sure who did or influenced what on *Chinese Ghost Story* and to be honest it doesn't matter much. This film stands above auteur-style criticism as what it is: a towering achievement that few films have ever reached.

WITCH FROM NEPAL

1987

Directed by Ching Siu Tung
Reviewed by John Dodd

The *Witch From Nepal* is much like Ching Siu Tung's *Chinese Ghost Story*. Both films are romantic fantasies with star-crossed lovers and an average person who becomes a hero. *Witch From Nepal* doesn't have the sense of depth or wonder of *Chinese Ghost Story* but there are a few nice moments along the way.

The first half hour of the film is very slow moving. Joe (Chow Yun Fat) and Ida are a young couple in Nepal. While vacationing, Joe sees Sheila (Emily Chu), a mysterious, veiled woman and finds himself drawing strange sketches. One of these sketches causes the elephant he is riding on to become spooked and Joe suffers some very painful pitfalls. Joe is

knocked unconscious by a branch, has his leg badly wounded, gets up only to fall into a raging stream, and then knocks himself unconscious again as he is riding the rapids. How he survives is a miracle. But what is more strange is what this interlude has to do with the rest of the film. Besides giving an excuse for Joe to be transported to a Hong Kong hospital, the answer is nothing.

While Joe is recuperating, Sheila shows up in the hospital. Joe is drawn to her and she is definitely drawn to Joe. After an escape from the hospital, she tells Joe that he is her new "master." Joe is at first bemused but grows to like her. Joe, however, must still hide her from Ida and there is another problem in the form of a magical necklace. Sheila has sworn to give it to Joe but lost it while escaping from the hospital. An evil figure who makes strange cat sounds is also after the necklace. Naturally, Joe is the one chosen to beat off the figure.

Until Sheila arrives in the hospital, the film is dead. The Nepal footage is strictly travelogue and Joe's adventure is more ridiculous than exciting. With Sheila's entrance things do pick up but these sections play like an Asian *I Dream Of Jeannie* (though Barbara Eden never looked this stunning). There are jokes involving Sheila's unfamiliarity with a stove, Joe trying to get a handle on his own mild telekinesis, and of course, hiding Sheila from Ida's eyes. While somewhat amusing, these scenes begin to wear on the viewer's patience. In time Sheila and Joe fall in love but despite decent acting by the leads, their romance lacks spark.

It isn't until the last half hour that the film gets going. There is a visually well-done confrontation in a graveyard and a street duel that has Joe using various items around him as weapons. But even these scenes leave the viewer with more anticipation than fulfillment. The zombies in the graveyard don't do anything and,

with the exception of one getting a hand lobbed off, don't even get beat up by the heroes. The finale on top of the buildings (borrowed from *Highlander*) overdoes the electric special effects and only seems to be taking itself half-seriously.

As a fantasy, *Witch From Nepal* doesn't have the sense of wonderment that is so needed in the genre. Nor is the romance completely satisfying, lacking the grave sense of threat or loss. Lastly, Ching Siu Tung's special effect techniques and flying-people action isn't as awe-inspiring as it was in the *Swordsman* films. The red and blue heavy colors (used by a lot of HK filmmakers) seem to get in the way at times. In fact, the best scenes are the simplest: A floating sketch being caught by the mysterious woman below; Sheila seeming to rise out of the desert; And, most notably, Sheila by the fire on the mountain top making a bow and arrow. These simple scenes catch just the right fantastical feel. A feel that is missing from most of the film.

Witch From Nepal is a decent time-waster with some good moments here and there. But as a whole the film misses more often than it hits, leaving the viewer with an unfulfilled promise.

YUEN KWEI



FIST OF LEGEND

1995

Directed by Yuen Kwei
Reviewed by Frank Kitzer

First thing that comes to mind about *Fist Of Legend* is that the film is a virtual remake of Bruce Lee's *Fists Of Fury* (aka *Chinese Connection*). We all know the

Police Assassin), the leads are Michelle Kahn and the current direct-to-video action superstar Cynthia Rothrock. A somewhat dated buddy cop movie, this script does not give any real character development of the two women - just no time for any bonding here. A trio of small-time thieves, Marlin, the Professor, and Fingers, are given more time in that department. Kahn gets the main tough-cop role although Rothrock at one point calls herself "Dirty Carrie."

The basic story involves the old standby - a piece of microfilm that can send its Triad owner to the slammer. A hitman who has killed a British blackmailer hides when Marlin, playing a hotel worker, enters the room and goes through the dead man's pockets. Leaving, he runs into Kahn, who is a friend of the victim. Thinking that Marlin is the murderer, she pursues. The hitman, knowing the film is now with the thief, gets away. Marlin and the Prof have managed also to evade and head to Fingers' place. Played by famed director Tsui Hark, the whining Fingers' specialty is forging documents.

Since the other two have the cash, Fingers puts the passport to good use as he has a customer ready to buy. This man goes to the airport and the police are alerted. Kahn and the cops confront the thug. Fleeing, he grabs a woman, telling them to back off. Turns out the hostage is really the special Scotland Yard officer, Rothrock (insert ass-kicking here). A rough interrogation leads to the source and the women find that the three thieves make better bait. This ends up leading everyone to the big bout finale. And it's a damn good one.

Yes! Madam shifts gears often. The more-than-proven tough female cops face a lot of sexism. Their strong desire to get the evidence results in suspension. The three thieves are shown in a comical way. While being used as bait, Marlin and the Prof try to get arrested on purpose. They go as far as pulling off Kahn's blouse in

the police station. All of this is really minor because Yuen delivers full amounts of chases and fighting throughout. Scene after scene shows that both women were in their prime when it comes to technique and agility (I'm always awestruck the way Rothrock kicks!). If you're not too picky about the mixed storyline, you will find Yes! Madam a lot of fun.

JACKIE CHAN



ARMOUR OF GOD

1987

Directed by Jackie Chan

Reviewed by William Roberts

I can remember my first Jackie Chan film. It was *The Big Brawl* (also known as *Battle Creek Brawl*) way back in 1980. I had loved Bruce Lee movies, but after his death everyone was trying to be Bruce Lee...or to be more precise, Bruce Li, Bruce Lei, Bruce Le, Bruce Lo, Dragon Lee, Conan Lee, etc. Nothing impressed me. Then I saw that another "New Bruce Lee" had appeared and his name was Jackie Chan. So I went.

And I stayed.

I sat through *The Big Brawl* twice, which is something I rarely do. Here was someone doing the same things Bruce Lee did but this time with a sense of humor. It was incredible. He even did some things I had never seen Lee do. I started my never-ending search for Chan movies.

I started collecting them bit by bit. And the last one I collected before discovering John Woo, Ringo Lam and other Hong Kong filmmakers was *Armour Of God*. Not one of Chan's best movies but, nevertheless, an entertaining one.

Jackie Chan

The plot is rather simple (aren't they all?): Chan plays Asian Hawk (no relation to Hudson Hawk), a former disco singer turned adventurer. Another former member asks Jackie for help in rescuing his kidnapped girlfriend. The problem is that the kidnappers don't want money for the girl; instead, they want the *Armour Of God*, a valuable artifact that gives the owner great powers. Jackie has to fight fanatic religious monks, Amazon kickboxers, and a tribe of cannibals before all is said and done.

Beginning with the exciting opening sequences where Jackie steals a ceremonial sword (part of the *Armour Of God*) from a group of cannibal warriors all the way to the climactic final battle against everybody where he has to escape a crumbling fortress by leaping onto a hot air balloon, *Armour Of God* has many of the typical Jackie Chan gimmicks. There are acrobatic battles and incredibly well-timed stunts. One, the opening scene,

almost killed Chan when he fell and injured his head (you can see it in the closing credits). If you haven't seen that many Jackie Chan movies, then you will love this one. Especially if you are in need of a Jackie Chan fix.

However, if you've seen a lot of his films, then you've seen this one also. Each of his movies is full of fantastic fights and battles and acrobatics and, starting in the 80's, incredible car chases and stunts. Chan started out as a Bruce Lee imitation but when his movies weren't as successful as they could have been, he switched gears and added humor to the action. It made him a star. Then, when the period costume pieces started to fade, he switched gears again, and he made some of his best movies ever with *Project A*, *Wheels On Meals*, and *Winners And Sinners*. Each was unique, exciting and fun. It was also during this period that Chan took on the role of director. As an action actor, Chan is great. As a director (and with the right material), Chan is greater. *Armour Of God*, however, is not the right material. Though fun, it can't seem to make up its mind if it wants to be a Jackie Chan movie, an Indiana Jones movie, or a James Bond movie.

And that is where the problem with *Armour Of God* lies - it has all the elements of a Jackie Chan movie, but they are in the wrong movie

POLICE STORY 2

1987

Directed by Jackie Chan
Reviewed by William Roberts

With the recent release of *Rumble In The Bronx* in the United States, I have seen Jackie Chan compared to Fred Astaire, Bruce Lee, and Sylvester Stal-

lone. If I have to compare him to any other movie star, I would have to compare him to Gene Kelly. Fred Astaire was too classy; Gene Kelly, on the other hand, was the movie dancer Everyman - - you felt as if he was just an ordinary guy doing extraordinary things. Bruce Lee? There was only one Bruce Lee. And Stallone? There's no comparison... Stallone isn't even close.

But Gene Kelly? Maybe.

Most people think of Gene Kelly and think of *Singing In The Rain*. But Kelly did a number of movies - - most notably, *The Three Musketeers*. In *The Three Musketeers*, Kelly buckles a swash with the best of them. Combining his natural athletic ability with his dancing, Kelly choreographed his sword fights with style, action, and humor. If you take that style, action and humor and put it in a Hong Kong movie, then you have Jackie Chan. That and the fact that you feel that Jackie is just an ordinary guy...doing extraordinary things.

That was the appeal of Jackie Chan when he first started. He wasn't that good-looking. He wasn't that good an actor. But what he did have was a personality that shone through his actions and his humor. When he fought, he was just like the rest of us. He'd get a few hits in but he would always get hit in return. He used whatever was available to fight. And he always won.

When period pieces stopped bringing crowds to the theatres, Jackie ventured into new areas like fighting pirates in *Project A*, monks in *Armour Of God*, and gangsters in *Police Story*. Well, in *Police Story 2*, Jackie has his hands (and fists) full with even more crooks and gangsters.

Police Story 2 is an exciting sequel to the hit *Police Story* with Jackie playing a cop named Chan (easy to remember) who butts heads with his superior officers. Since the first film, Chan has been demoted to a traffic cop because of his reckless disregard for proper procedures.

However, those procedures were effective enough for mob henchmen to threaten him with revenge. Add in a gang of terrorists who are setting bombs all over town and a kidnapped girlfriend and you've got one of the better Jackie Chan movies around.

The action is almost non-stop with some remarkable fights in a restaurant, in a playground, and an abandoned factory. Jackie uses all his talents, incorporating his surroundings into his fighting. A table, barrels, a desk, a slide - - if it's there, he'll use it. One added feature in *PS2*, though, is the use of explosives. Lots and lots of explosives. By film's end, Jackie blows up a shopping mall, a building, and a factory! In fact, the action is so intense that Maggie Cheung, who plays his girlfriend, is hurt badly near the end of the film. You can see what happened in the closing credits where they show all the missed stunts, but if you watch closely, you can see that they use a double in the remaining scenes of the movie (all distant shots or back of the head shots).

Overall, *PS2* is a good choice if you've never seen a Jackie Chan movie and you don't like costume pieces. But it is also a good choice if you like Jackie Chan and haven't seen it. Better yet, get both *Police Story* and *Police Story 2* and have a double feature!



*Jackie Chan and Anita Mui*

SPEAKING OF...
Jackie Chan
RUMBLE IN
THE USA

by Tony Lane

On February 23, 1996 Jackie Chan's *Rumble In The Bronx* opened on 1826 screens in the U.S., Canada and Puerto Rico. It was released by New Line Cinema. On its first week out it did \$10 million and nosed out John Woo's *Broken Arrow* as the top grossing film of the week.

Rumble, released over a year ago in Asia, will be Chan's third attempt to break into the American movie market. The other two films, *The Protector* and *The Big Brawl*, along with bit parts in the *Cannonball Run* series were quickly forgotten.

This time he dubbed his own dialogue and had great input in the re-editing, dubbing and music. What comes out of it is a tighter and, for American audiences, a more easily understood film. These changes might enrage hard line Jackie

Chan fans but even they might agree that the tone of the film remains the same. It's an hour and a half of wild action, humor and stunts. In short a typical Jackie Chan movie. Though considered not to be his best film by many it is still a lot of fun.

Unless you have been in a bomb shelter the last couple of months, it would have been hard to miss the spritely Chan on *Letterman*, *Leno*, *Entertainment Tonight*, local news shows, MTV and magazine articles.

What will grab the audiences, if anything, will be the approachable quality he has along with the stunts and humor. Women want to, at the least, mother him. Men see him as a guy they could share a brew with. What Chan does is unique and in a era of instant and mundane celebrity somebody who had 'paid his dues' just might appeal to jaded moviegoers.

There were many changes made to the original film before it was released here. He is no longer a Hong Kong cop, his girlfriend back home is only hinted at, scenes were switched around or removed, and the presence of characters (especially Anita Mui) were truncated. The fact that Chan's uncle and Chan's father were partners is also left out.

The most obvious cutting is evident in

the 'mirror scene'. Jackie doesn't know that his antics in front of a two way mirror are being watched by Anita Mui from the other side of the mirror. A lot of this has been edited out, which was a shame.

The motorcycle chase at night has been shortened and a very funny Chinese opera sequence at the wedding of Chan's uncle and Carrie Cain Sparks was also removed. New opening shots were added.

In the middle of the movie a scene with Anita Mui is gone. In it she tries to scare away the protection collectors who Jackie had thumped earlier in the film. She strikes a kung fu pose, is slapped, then pays them the money they want.

During many of the fight scenes (and there are a lot of them) a few small bits were clipped and repetitious images taken out. Also a cut of Jackie running down the street trying to escape from motorcycles while removing balloons from between his legs is out.

Anita Mui's attempt to sell the market she has bought from Jackie's uncle is missing but the end of the scene where Jackie gives her a 'thumbs up' has been added to the out takes at the film's end.

Jackie's singing over the end credits was removed and replaced by something a *lot* less entertaining.

Several small bits were added following the wild fight in the bad gang's club house. They were Jackie and Francois Yip running out the back door, she losing her shoes, Jackie grabbing them, then she kicks over the line of motorcycles belonging to the bad gang before she and Jackie leap on her bike and ride away.

A lot of scenes were moved around in an attempt to make the movie flow more evenly. Does it work? Yes. The original did drag a bit in places. Should New Line have cut out as much as they did? Not in all cases. A lot of humor is gone. But what audiences think is far more important than the opinion of your humble reviewer.

Time will tell of Jackie Chan's invasion of the U.S.A. works out. I hope it does. There is nobody out there like him and it would be sad to see the American public not appreciate his films.

REVIEWS Continued

JOHN WOO

◆ ◆ ◆

THE KILLER

1990

AND

BULLET IN THE HEAD

1989

Directed by John Woo
Reviewed by Steve Sanders

There really isn't much I can say about John Woo that you probably haven't already heard. Being the first Hong Kong director to get noticed and adopted by Hollywood he's been the subject of countless articles.

Like many other people John Woo was my first introduction to Asian cinema and Hong Kong action films. I remember hearing about him from some friend and so one night I rented *The Killer*. There was no looking back. I was blown away and soon HK films became my main movie diet.

Because of this, and because Woo is such a darling of Hollywood now, it was interesting to take another look at some of the films that first got me hooked on HK cinema. I wondered if they would stand up. I am glad to report that they

did. Actually they did more than stand up -- they stood up and kicked my ass.

First up was *The Killer*. For those of you not familiar with the story, the film is about Jeff, a hitman who is very good at what he does. Played to the coolest by Chow Yun Fat, he is a one-man, two-handgunned killing machine. On one hit, however, Chow accidentally blinds a nightclub singer (Sally Yeh). Struck with remorse he vows to only do one more job to get enough money for an operation to restore her sight. Unfortunately the mob



Chow Yun-Fat and wife Xen

he works for would rather see him dead than paid. Also plaguing our hero is a dutiful cop who is hot on Chows trail. After a game of cat and mouse they become uneasy friends after he learns of Chows honor and good intentions. This leads up to the climactic million bullet finale as everyone clashes.

What sets this simple story apart from the usual buddy action film that we've seen a million times is the classic John

Woo touch. Woo embodies this, and pretty much all of this film with a sense of friendship and loyalty that you just don't see in other pictures. Here Chow and Danny Lee are more than allies against a million bullets, but real friends with a respect for each other. Even though they are uneasy partners, they seem more like brothers who would do anything for each other.

Then there is the action. No one can stage it like Woo. Standout scenes for me in *The Killer* include the first hit where Chow takes on a club full of thugs armed with only two handguns. I know it's been said before about Woo, but it truly is a ballet of violence. Bullets fly, people die in a beautiful slow motion dance of blood and death. I can't do it justice to describe it, you have to see it. The finale, pitting our heroes against at least a hundred well-armed gangsters is unbelievable. Set in a church it is so well shot and choreographed it literally left me with my mouth hanging open. If *The Killer* isn't one of the best action pictures ever made, I'll eat the tape.

Second on my Woo re-look was *Bullet In The Head*. It tells the story of three loyal friends in 1960's Hong Kong who turn to smuggling to make money. In an attempt to smuggle contraband into Viet Nam, they lose the goods and turn to robbery to make enough money to get back home. They steal a chest of gold from a gangster who is in league with the government. Pursued by them, they run and are captured by the Viet Cong. Will they ever make it home? I'm not telling.

Bullet In The Head is probably Woo's most intense and character driven piece. Sure there are the usual amazing fight scenes, with the robbery being a fine example of Woo pyrotechnics, but this story is more about the people than the explosions.

Our three heroes are portrayed excellently, with Tony Leung especially turning in an amazing performance as Ben.

Tony Leung: Bullet In The Head



Once again Woo's themes of friendship and loyalty are woven throughout the film as greed and the horrors of the war take their toll on the characters' relationships. This movie is not for the weak of heart. The prisoner of war camp scene, where our heroes are forced to shoot other prisoners ranks up there with the most disturbing and intense scenes I've ever seen. It's an example of almost perfect movie making.

Everyone turns in a great performance here. In addition to Tony Leung, Jacky Cheung and Waise Lee as the three main characters, Simon Yam smokes as a smuggler/CIA agent. He's incredibly slick and suave and Yam gives the character real life.

Bullet In The Head has been compared to *The Deer Hunter*, and certainly there are similarities, but I think this film has does a much better job of fleshing out the characters and making you feel for them.

I know I felt more for them than with anyone in *The Deer Hunter*.

Clocking in at two hours plus, this is an epic film, so be prepared to set aside some time to view it. It will be time well spent though. This is a great movie.

Since Woo has gone Hollywood, a lot of people say he really isn't that good of a movie maker anymore. After viewing these, I have to say they have absolutely no idea what they are talking about. You want good stories and strong characters and incredible action? Go get Woo. End of story.

SPEAKING OF... John Woo

PEACE HOTEL

1995

Directed by Wai Ka Fau
Reviewed by Max Allan Collins

Haunting, evocative cinematography and a typically charismatic performance from star Chow Yun Fat make *Peace Hotel* a must for any fan of Asian action cinema. And the presence in the credits of John Woo - - albeit in an "Executive Producer" position - - promises a return for Chow Yun Fat to the greatness of better yesterdays.

That promise, however, is only partially kept. How involved Woo was remains in question; director/screenwriter credit goes to Wai Ka Fau. Is Woo's title an honorary one, designed to give Chow the Woo imprimatur, now that the master of Heroic Bloodshed has moved on to Hollywood, while his friend and former star has remained behind in Hong Kong, mired in lesser vehicles? Or (as rumor persists) did Woo actually ghost-direct the film?

Certainly *Peace Hotel* has such Woo trademarks as lyrical slow motion action sequences, including poetically flapping doves and drifting scraps of paper, and the familiar Woo themes of betrayal, friendship and family are abundantly present. And, most outrageously, Chow Yun Fat's tragedy-shrouded character is even called "The Killer!" It seems doubtful that Woo took much of an actual hand, however, as the emphasis here is not on action, but on the unlikely love story between the Killer and a beautiful woman (Cecilia Yip) who may be a thief, prostitute or even a ghost.

This relationship -- a feisty man/woman duel worthy of Howard Hawks -- is the strength of the film and the real tip-off that Woo probably had little to do with it. John Woo's genius has not, to date, extended to female characterizations, and this central female character marks *Peace Hotel* as an unlikely Woo work.

Also, there is surprisingly scant action until the final reel (where it does pay off in a shoot-out that has Chow Yun Fat doing a variation on his gun-blazing sliding down the banister, though this seems more likely a pastiche of Woo than an actual Woo-ghosted sequence). Until this strong final sequence, the action scenes, with their slow motion and still frame gimmickry, are stylish but rather incoherent.

There *is* violence and action in *Peace Hotel* -- just not Woo-level violence and action -- and the fluid, graceful camera work along with the golden-dappled earth tones of Wong Wing Hang's cinematography make for a visual feast. The major problem for Western audiences will be the English subtitles, which fall below even the usual half-assed pigeon standard of Hong Kong product; and secondary characters whose overacting and Eastern-style comedy schtick will find little favor outside Asia.

While *Peace Hotel* is a straightforward, even simple story -- an Eastern Western that pays obvious homage to *Rio Bravo*,

Chow Yun-Fat: Peace Hotel



Seven Samurai/Magnificent Seven, and particularly *Django* (among other Italian westerns, right down to a striking Morricone-tinged score by Cacine Wong and Healthy Poon) -- the backstory never becomes clear, due to the lousy translation. Chow Yun Fat's "Killer" is a former bandit leader (apparently in the early 1900's, although some of the weaponry seems suspiciously modern) whose wife and men betrayed him; as depicted in a moody, mostly black-and-white, slow-motion flashback, he slaughtered all in his traitorous camp except for a young boy, and then in remorse opened his "Peace Hotel" on the site of his massacre. This hotel is a sanctuary for any fugitive, criminal or otherwise and no one dares challenge the killer innkeeper. Most of the residents seem to be there permanently as it's more a little world, or at least a village, than a hotel. Into this safe haven

runs a beautiful woman chased by a bandit horde whose leader carries a deadly hidden agenda.

Two dramatic death scenes (at least one of which turns out to be a false alarm) highlight a well-structured tale (Chow takes the story credit himself), with lovely resonance of imagery as "now" sequences frequently echo flashbacks; but, again, the motivations and backstory remain cloudy due to the haphazard translation.

If Peace Hotel isn't quite the triumphant, John Woo-directed return we might hope for, for Chow Yun Fat, it is a reminder of the power and poetry of Asian Trash Cinema.

More WONG JING

KUNG FU CULT MASTER

1993

Directed by Wong Jing
Reviewed by John Crawford

Any person who loves movies and the home theatre experience will love Kung Fu Cult Master. I feel that this is "The Greatest Film Ever Made". Is that too strong for you? How about "A Masterpiece of Cinema"? How about "Man, This Flick Rocks!"?

1993 was a very busy year for the prolific Wong Jing, having directed and/or produced at least seven films including Last Hero in China and Holy Weapon. I believe that Kung Fu Cult Master is his best work of the lot. Wong Jing is the subject of much derision in the fancy world of criticism. He has been called the "Roger Corman of HK Cinema" which, I think, is

not a bad thing. In the unsettled climate of pre-1997 Hong Kong, Wong has continued producing films at a feverish pace while other filmmakers have sought the pot o' gold in Europe and the USA. The ever popular Jet Li is featured, along with a galaxy of HK movie stars, in a fantastic martial arts story based on a traditional novel by Yin Jong. The story has been made into numerous films and television shows in Hong Kong and Mainland China.

There are so many incredible sequences in the film that it is impossible to know which ones to tell you about. It starts off right in the titles, with furious kung fu and a spoken narration that gives the historical background leading us to the saga of Chang Mo Kei and the events on his granduncles 100th birthday. On this fateful day, Mo Kei witnesses his parents double suicide at the hands of the 6 Schools of Martial Arts led by the monks of Shaolin.

Cut to 7 years later. As a child Mo Kei was hit with "Jinx's Palm" by enemies of his father. He is unable to practice kung fu and gets the chills from his lack of inner strength. His granduncle Chang San Feng has cared for him since his parents death. Yes, you read it correctly. He doesn't know how to fight and couldn't learn kung fu!

Seeking his revenge, Mo Kei takes a reverse road to reuniting the warring factions. He learns the most powerful of all stance's first, the Great Solar Stance, which cures him of his weakness and makes him practically invincible. By the end of film, Mo Kei must use Tai-chi, the most basic of stances, to defeat his enemies.

Jet Li is just great as the master Mo Kei. The wide scope of styles and wire tricks suit his unique skills. Samo Hung plays the granduncle and is also the films Action Director. This great star is at his finest in KFCM. Under his skillful supervision, the action never lets up from the first

frame until the last frame (really). Oh, yeah...if I mention Chingmy Yau and Cheung Man (in two roles) does that tell you anything.

Caught up in my enthusiasm after viewing the movie several times, I pitched my

Editor on reviewing Wong Jing's masterpiece. I now realize my humble words could never express to the readers how really beautiful this film truly is. I urge every HK movie fan to seek out Kung Fu Cult Master!

Japanese Make-up EFX Come of Age

by Tony Lane

I was 6 years old. On the huge movie screen before me Godzilla ravaged Tokyo. I was frozen in terror, in awe of what I was seeing. Over 40 years later I'm still in awe of the recently departed giant monster, his kin and his enemies.

Even during the 60's when most folks referring to the new Godzilla design as 'Dork-Zilla' he still fascinated me.

The EFX make-ups in Japan for many years were often laughable. Ultraman in his many incarnations had monsters that looked like wetsuits with bits of whatever glued to them. In many of the Ultraman suits the zipper was very obvious. We accepted these reality clangers and just enjoyed what we were watching.

Somewhere along the line I managed to become a make-up artist in Hollywood (The pilot for The Incredible Hulk, The New Twilight Zone, Six Million Dollar Man and many others) and watched my favorite monsters with a more practiced

eye. I still loved them but sometimes the suits made me cringe slightly. While the world was moving forward with foam latex, plastics and new rubber concoctions the Japanese were still gluing bits of whatever to the same old wetsuits.

In the late 60's and 70's quite a few make-up artists from Hollywood were invited over to Japan. They were encouraged to share their ideas with the EFX folks at Toho. Most of this sharing went one way. The Americans were shown very little of what the Japanese were doing. At the same time the Yanks had their brains picked very politely.

At that time the floors of the sound stages at Toho (rebuilt in 1952-1953) were still bare earth. Many still are. Bob Romero (Logan's Run, Deep Space Nine, Unsolved Mysteries) told me how the folks at Toho would bind tree trunks together and spread concrete over them to make a flat surface for shooting. If some-

thing had to be anchored the guy lines were nailed into the exposed wood at the edges. It seemed to work pretty well. If they had to do a low shot all they had to do was dig a hole in soft earth instead of chewing up a concrete floor. As far as he could tell the EFX folks were still using glue and wetsuits.

As time passed I began to notice that the heads on many monsters began to have a molded look. In some cases it was possible to see the mold lines. This meant that the new creations had been sculpted in clay or plastecine then plaster moulds had been made from them. From the moulds rubber masks could be 'slush moulded' and attached to the suits. Things were improving but it was happening slowly. The hokey aspects of these new beasts were part of their charm. In the Godzilla heads robotics have been used lately to give him more expression.

All at once things changed. Big time! I first noticed it in a film called Zeram. The constantly changing monster suits were

very impressive. I watched it with a fellow make-up artist and were were surprised at what we were seeing. The suits had life! Foam latex had been used for the finer features and what appeared to be PVC had been incorporated in many areas for fluid movement and stretching. Spandex covered pods were used under the skins to give the appearance of muscle movement. Even inflating bladders had been added for effect. Things began looking up even more when we spotted some pretty good stop motion photography.

Recently I saw Kamen Rider J: The Movie. That film makes it quite evident that Japanese EFX make-ups have moved firmly into the 20th century. The suits on the two main heavies were outstanding! Every trick I know was used, even hard plastic or molded epoxy resin for exposed bone areas. They looked like something that *could* exist in the real world. The wings, ridges and horns on the bodies were there for a reason rather than being something that looked 'monster-ish'. Stop motion photography was used also and most of it worked pretty well. Even some computer animation was mixed in the with live action shots.

For the kid in me there were, I admit, some clunky looking dinosaurs and something that was supposed to be a large grasshopper named Berry that wasn't quite right. None of that mattered though because I had seen what I have been looking for for a long time -- well crafted articulated monster suits.

Where the Japanese will take this new ability is anybody's guess. The new monsters in *Godzilla Vs. Destroyer* look ok on paper and *Gamera Vs. Legion* also look like fun. But I have a hunch we are going to see something in the then next few years that will be even more impressive. I can't wait. Why? Simple, I'm still that 6 year old watching a guy in a rubber suit smashing up Tokyo and I'm loving every minute of it!



from Godzilla Vs Destroyer



X - Live At The Tokyo Dome

by Raymond Ranaletta

Being a pre-grunge metalhead and, quite frankly, disappointed over the current state of what passes for head-banging music, it was much to my delight and surprise when I took a chance and picked up "X" Live At The Tokyo Dome. I felt 15 years younger during and after this live concert video.

For the uninitiated, "X" is the premiere (in Japan) heavy metal rock band led by the most incredibly multi-talented drummer I've ever had the chance to witness, Yoshiki. "X" has received some stateside recognition, though admittedly minor. If not for ACC publisher Tom Weisser's enthusiastic recommendation, I would've thought "X" to be just another letter of the alphabet. Thanks Tom!! "X" was and is a revelation to these eyes and ears. Combining the best of the mid- to late-70's KISS-style glam rock with the thun-

derous power and speed of Metallica, "X" is a high octane, turbocharged, metal-head's dream come true.

Live At The Tokyo Dome exemplifies all the "over the top" excesses that metal-heads like myself have come to love. A large venue, packed to the rafters with crazed, screaming fans. An awesome stage show complete with laser lights, explosions, smoke and confetti, all meticulously coordinated to *enhance* and not detract from the music. Ahh, yes, the music. That, of course, is what it's all about and "X", for all its theatrics and showmanship, deliver a superbly crafted sound, guaranteed to satisfy all but the most psychotically rabid grunge and death metalheads.

The present incarnation of the band or at least as I know it to be consists of Toshi (lead vocals), Taji (bassist),

Hide and Pata (co-lead guitarists), and Yoshiki (drummer). In *Live At The Tokyo Dome*, it takes no time at all to understand how this band has such a fanatical following, known as X-Freaks, in Japan. With the lights dimmed and the jam-packed Tokyo Dome threatening to burst at the seams, "X" takes the stage to a thunderous roar of screaming and cheering X-Freaks, launching into a blistering opening number called "Silent Jealousy," amidst the accompanying pyrotechnics and lasers. More steam is gathered as the band follows up with "Sadistic Desire." Both songs, as is really the case with the entire set successfully bridge the gap between speed and pop metal, combining the two in pulse-pounding, rhythmic guitar riffs that smoothly blend in with some of the most exasperating and machine gun-like drum work ever heard.

A brief lull in the action comes as Toshi converses with the audience and introduces the band members. Immediately apparent is the strong bond between the

fans and their band. No phony posing or lack of sincerity here as Toshi works the crowd into a frenzy leading to the next song, "Desperate Angel." As with the opening songs, "Angel" is loud and fast, highlighted by Yoshiki's incredible combination of speed and rhythm. Even more expressionistic and dramatic than his fellow band members (which is saying quite a lot!), Yoshiki is the main cog in this supercharged engine. With long braided hair, and a definite feminine appearance, highlighted by the spandex Glam look of the band, Yoshiki epitomizes "X"'s broad appeal. The forcefulness with which he attacks his drums during the set and in an amazing sonic assault during his drum solo piece (complete with a rotating, hydraulic riser, background classical music, accompanied by lasers and smoke) is brilliantly contrasted with a classical piano solo that is both mesmerizing and maniacal throughout. Yoshiki is both the consummate artist and sensitive gender-bending showman.



Next up is "Sadistic Sex," a strong rocker featuring a blistering guitar opening which features both leads, Hide and Pata. Both guitarists play well off each other, Hide the more flamboyant while Pata assumes an almost Richie Blackmore-type stoic appearance. Following up with "Weekend," lead vocalist Toshi proves he is no weak link by any means. While Yoshiki may be the main attraction, Toshi is a frontman in the truest sense of the word. With a dynamic and wide vocal range, Toshi is never drowned out by the wall of sound emanating behind him. Distinct and succinct, Toshi's vocals never seemed rushed or out of key. His interaction with the crowd is a sight to behold not so much for the crowd reaction (though it's awesome) as for the apparent ease with which he works them. Not a hint of insincerity at any time. Bass player Taji, meanwhile, is the rhythmic glue that binds it all together in this impressively cohesive unit.

Onward through Yoshiki's incredible drum and piano solos, *Live At The Tokyo Dome*'s second half appears to contain the bands hit songs, "Savage Celebration" and "Joker." Without knowing for sure, I say this solely because of the unbelievable crowd response and a more "metal lite" flavor to them. The band's theme song, "X Theme," brings the band back to its initial bombastic, balls to the wall style as they crank up the crowd to an almost dangerous level of frenzied worship.

All the stops are pulled as "X" goes for broke with an unparalleled level of energy, combined with audience participation as the stage erupts in a multitude of special effects...almost making this spectacle one for the ages!! Closing out the show is an absolutely astounding ballad, "Endless Rain." A religious-like fervor appears to inhabit the crowd as they at first sing along with Toshi, then take it themselves accompanied by Yoshiki on the piano,

Yoshiki: possibly world's best rock drummer



finally going it on their own, as the band watches this god-like worship of them with a seeming humility rarely seen anymore in the bands of today. This song closes the best damn metal concert I've seen in a long, long time!

"X" is a breath of fresh air in the current stagnant and depressing metal scene. No mosh pits (thank God), no crowd violence, and a band which truly appears to enjoy and appreciate its celebrity (in Japan) status. More than a few US metal bands could take lessons from "X". In fact, I think it's safe to say that "X" would and should be a major headlining act in the US if it wasn't for the stuck-on-itself attitude of the selfish and egotistical US music industry. It's a crime that this band is practically unknown here in the states. All you metal fans out there, do yourself a favor and get "X" - *Live At The Tokyo Dome*. Shit, man, I feel like I'm 18 all over again. Think I'll go find me an 8-pack of Miller ponies and torch up.

PS~

In the next issue of Asian Cult Cinema, we will feature our regular reviews of current and classic Asian films as well as an interview with Ric Meyers and Bill and Karen Palmer, the authors of The Encyclopedia Of Martial Arts Movies.

Remember, if you have questions, comments or gripes, feel free to write us at:
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Yu Serizawa